DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 679 CE 040 454

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TITLE Establishing a Work Experience Program in Building Trades Entrepreneurship.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 14p.; Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; *Building Trades; Cooperative Planning; *Cooperative Programs; Economically Disadvantaged; Educational Benefits; Educational Cooperation; *Entrepreneurship; Guidelines; Outcomes of Education; *Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; School Business Relationship; Tax Deductions; *Trade and Industrial Education; *Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS Maryland (Baltimore)

ABSTRACT

A project was undertaken to establish a cooperative work experience program in building trades entrepreneurship. The first phase of the program, which was implemented in Baltimore, Maryland, involved the formation of a task force that included representatives of the school, business, industry, and public sectors. Eventually, two Baltimore contractors each agreed to hire four economically disadvantaged students for a two-year work experience program. In order to alleviate the employers' fears that the students might not be able to meet strict contract deadlines and might thereby jeopardize their employers' business concerns, the City agreed to allow the employers to deduct up to 85 percent of a program participant's salary for the first year and up to 25 percent provided the student was retained for a second year. Because the contractors eventually lost some of their bids, the number of program participants was reduced to four for the second year. Despite the somewhat limited scope of the project, it was deemed a success in that it provided the students with an exposure to the advantages and disadvantages of self-employment and afforded them the opportunity to be coached by a seasoned professional in this area. Student interest in entrepreneurship in the building trades appeared to increase after participation in the project. (Two flow charts are appended.) (MN)

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ESTABLISHING A WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM IN BUILDING TRADES ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Establishing a Work Experience Program
in Building Trades Entrepreneurship

Vocational eduation, because of its close relationship with occupational preparation, is thought to be most effective in the achievement of quality programs by establishing, maintaining, and constantly renewing connections with the business and industrial communities. This has been urged upon vocational educators from pre-Smith Hughes times to the very recent (see Sherman, 1983 and the Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984, for examples). But, as practitioners in the profession well know, along with many altruistic leaders of business and industry, such connections are not easy to establish, and are even more difficult to maintain at viable levels. Many reasons have been offered for this dilemma. Perhaps the most critical one is that vocational educators and business industrial liaison persons do not have these roles identified as being among their major job responsibilities.

Attempts to plan joint sessions in which vocational educators seek ways to help businesses, industries, and public agencies often end up being an "extra task" - one that is assigned to certain educational administrators and agency managers. In many situations, individuals "volunteer" to serve on such committees. While the spirit of volunteerism often goes a long way to keep some groups viable, such persons need constant and meaningful support (O'Connell, 1983).

This was found to be endemic in establishing a cooperative work experience program in building trades entrepreneurship. At the onset it was learned that no agency at the county or city level had educational administrators or managers from the private sector who were

assigned this type of task as a part of their ongoing responsibilities. Fortunately, individuals were found who were willing to delve into ways in which vocational education and the private sector could better connect in the interest of helping the private sector.

Strategies

The first step was to delimit the problem in order to enhance its manageability and chances for success. After a number of exploratory meetings with a task force established in Baltimore City, a goal was set to develop and implement a cooperative work experience program in building trades entrepreneurship (see Figure 1). The following sequence of activities occurred:

1. Key decision-makers from all of the participating agencies were identified including the Director of the City's Vocational Education Programs, the Dean of Occupational Education Programs for the City's Community College, the Chairperson of the Economic Development Commission, an official from the City's Minority Business Development Agency, and a Specialist from the Division of Vocational-Technical Education at the Maryland State Department of Education. These people were asked to become involved because they (a) possessed sufficient influence and authority to "get things done" and (b) seemed most interested in forming a fusion to develop a project and insure its implementation.

2. Rapport was established with the individuals in the group. The members agreed that, within the rubric of their present job capacities, they would search for ways to enhance cooperation between the local vocational education delivery system and economic development commission.

3. Meetings were carefully designed and facilitated in order to minimize conflicts with other priority concerns of the participants, and to manage affairs so that, at the conclusion of every work session, the participants recognized that actions directly related to the basic objectives had been completed.

4. Consensually arrived at suggestions were aggressively implemented prior to each meeting.

5. Mechanisms were established for rewarding successes that could be inaugurated on a regular basis. This included provisions for publicity that would cover group directives, their implementation, and achievements.

6. Every group member maintained a system for the identification and utilization of key resource persons who shared their concerns and had the authority to make decisions regarding plans emanating from their meetings. Included were local and state political figures, Chairpersons of Local Advisory and Private Industry Councils, among others (Figure 1 - Hypotenuse).

The facilitators responsible for implementing this sequence of activities had to constantly endeavor to keep the effort flowing smoothly, with a minimal amount of wasted time. Efficiently conducted meetings, in good physical facilities, with the occasional provision of meals, enhanced the progress of the overall group activities and ultimately resulted in the development of a quality program.

Narrative

The major project conceived by the Baltimore City Task Force was the identification and implementation of a cooperative work experience program in building trades entrepreneurship. In order to best

accomodate the busy schedules of the individuals involved, a decision was made to hold breakfast meetings and to guarantee adjournment by 9:00 a.m. These were held in a centrally located hotel, which was easily accessible to all participants. Breakfast was served family style in a relatively noise-free area. This action made it possible to eat and meet at the same time.

Proceedings of each meeting were promptly written up and sent to all of the members of the group. Suggestions made at each gathering were implemented. When difficulties were encountered, direct assistance was sought from participants who were best able to assist. From time to time, selected individuals from other agencies were brought in through direct requests from influential members of the group, to cooperate in addressing specific problems. The overall feeling that emanated from these focused endeavors was that the vocational education delivery system had improved its manner of assisting the city in its economic development efforts.

Results

The every-other monthly meetings were held for about 15 months. Several important outcomes occurred which included the:

1. establishment of a Cooperative Work Experience Program in Building Trades Entrepreneurship;

2. strengthening of working relationships between several state agencies dealing with economic development and job training, Baltimore City's secondary vocational education division, and the city's community colleges and

3. establishment of a joint presentation on the process in which the group engaged and the results achieved.

The presentation

delivered at a statewide conference for secondary and postsecondary vocational education administrators, chairpersons of county economic development commissions, and the chairpersons of local advisory and private industry councils.

The Cooperative Work Experience Program in Building Trades Entrepreneurship

This project evolved from continuous probing for answers to the question, "How can vocational education better serve the concerns of economic development and private business in Baltimore?" The City of Baltimore was already heavily engaged in a number of urban housing renewal projects. Through the series of meetings described earlier, city officials, state officials, private construction contractors, and numerous vocational educators from the Baltimore School System designed and implemented a cooperative work experience program in building trades entrepreneurship.

The Format. Two contractors agreed, through a cooperative work contract, to employ four students at the onset of the project. A two semester program was developed (see Figure 2). The first semester consisted of "hands on" experiences typical of many cooperative work programs in the construction trades (which the city schools already had in operation) (Herschbach, 1978; Kimbrell & Vineyard, 1975). The more unique part of this program was found in the second semester, when the students learned about the various entrepreneurial aspects of the construction business - specifically the rebuilding or rehabilitation of homes in the urban setting. The popularity of rebuilding old townhouses and rowhouses in the Baltimore area made this an attractive venture for many contractors.

The contractors who volunteered to employ the students on a cooperative work experience basis were concerned about the costs and benefits of the program. Since they were in private business for themselves, they needed some assurances that, by employing these students, they would not jeopardize their business ventures. Time constraints imposed by the city were included among their concerns, since renovations and rebuilding projects had to be completed within a framework that was demanding, according to the contractors. It was found that the federally sponsored Targeted Jobs Tax Credit (TJTC) allowance could be applied. This plan enabled employers to claim up to 85% of a cooperative work program participant's salary (with a limit of $3500) for the first year and a lesser amount if the student was retained for a second year (the limitation would then be a deduction of 25% up to $1500). These amounts would materialize in the form of tax rebates to the employer.

Educators from the City school system agreed to determine which students were eligible for TJTC allowances, since they had to qualify as disadvantaged students. Representatives of several city housing and manpower agencies were called in to confer with the contractors to clarify some of the other concerns of the contractors, all of which were answered satisfactorily.

Implementation. The details of the plan were ironed out and ready for implementation by the winter of 1983. In the spring, two contactors signed on eight students. At that point in time, the project was proceeding as scheduled and indicators pointed to its potential success.

Present status. The first group of students was reduced to four (from eight) at the end of the first semester of the program's

operation. This happened because the contractors lost some of their bids in the Baltimore City Housing Rehabilitation Project. The students who remained went into the entrepreneurship training part of the program with the contractors during the summer season.

A variety of interesting experiences were provided for the students, including involvement in a project where they conducted the research required to prepare bids on properties in the Baltimore City Housing Rehabilitation Project. They shadowed the contractor, often on a daily basis. This experience provided the students with an exposure to the advantages and disadvantages of self-employment and afforded them the opportunity to be coached by a seasoned professional.

All of the students who were engaged in the project graduated from high school and either went on to further schooling or employment. Upon completion of the program, they all indicated a high degree of usefulness of the knowledge gained in the entrepreneurial cooperative work program. In addition, their interest in becoming self-employed was enhanced through their direct experiences with the inner workings of home building contractorship.

Students for the second year have been selected and placed with contractors. At this time, the project is limited to one year in duration for carefully selected students from the building trades vocational programs. Contractors continue to be directly involved in the final selection of students who are to be engaged in the program under their supervision.

Conclusions

The project described, although a modest one in terms of the numbers of students served, is heartening and promises to become an

ongoing effort. It has achieved its major goal of combining entrepreneurship training in the building trades with cooperative work experience programs. It can also be viewed as an effective vehicle for the provision of relevant and up to date education for special populations, such as urban minority youth who are economically disadvantaged. At this point, it is seen as a successful endeavor in vocational education that benefits the students, building contractors, and the community as a whole.

Although the project is still a relatively new one, several important lessons were learned that can be transferred to future endeavors of this variety. Briefly, they are:

1. Vocational educators must make themselves valuable to the community, region, and state from which they derive their funding and their students.

2. An important method to pursue the above concern is through the establishment and maintenance of liaison groups involving economic developers and key personnel from businesses, industries, and other public agencies who can be brought in during times of decision making.

3. Many people concerned with the worth of education are more likely to endorse vocational education if it includes a strong cooperative work experience component. Therefore, more energy should be spent on integrating and expanding this kind of programming in curricula for students in all vocational education programs.

4. Developing cooperative vocational education programs will require more funding than is presently allocated in many states. Contracts that provide some financial incentives for employers should be considered - perhaps as adjunct faculty or other methods whereby they

are given credit for being an integral part of the vocational education delivery system.

5. Time spent in laboratories, shops, and clinics could possibly be reduced in some school settings as more program related cooperative work programs are set up. The teacher's role could be modified to include placement and supervision of students in appropriate work stations, while minimizing the emphasis on shop work or projects. The discontinuance of such clinical activities could provide a source of funds to expand and enhance cooperative work experience programs. In addition to offering instructors more flexibility in updating and developing their curricula, students may be given the opportunity to become exposed to state of the art equipment and current practices in their trades or skill areas.

In the final analysis, vocational education has as its underlying purpose to help persons of all ages to make better adjustments to the occupational aspects of their lives, while simultaneously supporting the plans for the economic development the state or local region. If we address this objective in relevant ways, vocational education will be viewed as a quality solution to regional and state employment and economic development concerns. Increasing the perceived value of vocational education to society is clearly achievable by inaugurating programs such as the one in Cooperative Vocational Education Building Trades Entrepreneurship.

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Figure 1

Procedure for Establishing a Work Experience Program
in Building Trades Entrepreneurship

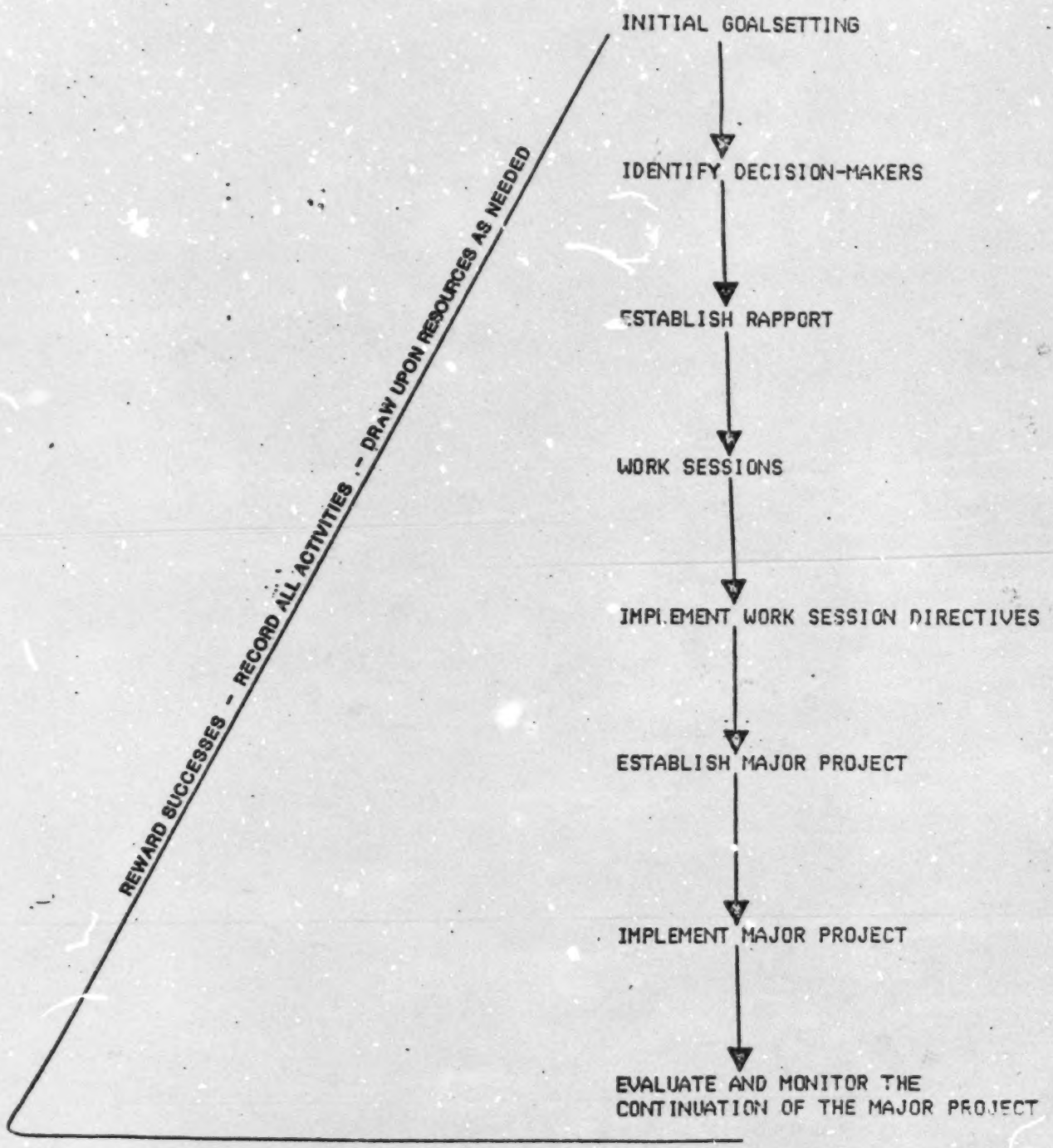

Figure 2

Procedure for Establishing a Work Experience Program
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